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The Inclusion of Literature Components in Malaysian English Papers: the Challenges and Pros in Teaching and Learning

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Abstract: The low proficiency attainment in English language among Malaysian learners has been given main attention in Malaysia Ministry of Education's plan to further improve education. Part of the plan is by introducing literature components in the teaching and learning of English language curriculum. This has immediately changed the scenario of teaching and learning in English language classroom. This paper will review past studies related to the implementation of Literature component in English language by looking specifically at the teacher's roles since teachers are the direct factor contributor in learners' process of learning and teaching. Apart of roles in the learning process, teachers' approaches employed in teaching literature component will be critically reviewed in this paper and suitable approaches available in teaching literature in English will be put forward.

Keywords: Teachers' approaches; teaching of literature in English; low proficiency learners.

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INTRODUCTION

English is a compulsory subject for all students either in secondary or primary school. Nevertheless according to Ministry of Education, Malaysia (2012), operational proficiency in English currently is, however, still at lower level. Only 28% of students achieved a minimum credit in the 2011 SPM English paper against Cambridge 1119 standards. The 2005 School Certificate Examination Report on English Language 2 revealed that the majority of the candidates had not shown a good proficient in English (Samuel & Bakar, 2008). This is seen as a crucial factor

as year after year, examiners express with great dismay the fact that after having learnt English language for eleven years, Malaysian rural learners in most cases fail to produce even a short paragraph of intelligible writing (Samuel & Bakar, 2008).

A lot of effort and suggestions have been put forward to attract learners to learn and master the English language. In year 2011, the government brought 375 native-speaking teachers to teach English in school (Bernat & Lloyd, 2007; Che Musa, Lie, & Azman, 2012; Granger, 2003; Hall, 2005; Hedge, 2001; Kachru, 2006). Currently, Ministry of

Education (2012) has expanded the LINUS programmed to include English literacy. In this programmed, every student in Years 1 to 3 will be screened twice a year to determine if they are progressing in English literacy at an expected pace. Students who fall behind will be given remedial coaching until they are able to return to the mainstream curriculum (Watts, 2000; Wei, Hutagalung, & Zakaria, 2015). In addition, teachers working with such students will also receive dedicated coaching from district level teacher coaches. However, one of prevailing government move is by incorporating literature components across the English curriculum in year 2000 to help learners improve their command of English. Since then, it has become an alternative resource for the teaching of language (Ismail, Aziz, & Abdullah, 2008). The Ministry of Education has also explained the reason of including the literature component in the syllabus specification as follows:

Language for aesthetic purposes enables learners to enjoy literary texts at a level suited to their language proficiency and develops in them the ability to express them creatively. (KBSM English language Curriculum Specifications, 2003:2)

Apart from that, Ministry of Education (2003) aims to enhance learners' acquisition of English by providing examples of language in contexts which authentic and interesting. When the Ministry of Education in Malaysia announced the incorporation of the new literature component into the national English language curriculum, many English medium parents welcome it as timely and most prevailing advancement after the adoption of the communicative approach into the curriculum. According to Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, (2013); Pachler, Evans, Redondo, & Fisher (2013), new methods will be utilized for teaching literature in schools starting 2013 to boost students' confidence in the language. These include more "production" activities

such as choral reading, acting out scenes from stories and producing works on different literary genres to enhance creativity (Abrams & Harpham, 2011). Specifically, the aims of this component incorporation are to enhance students' proficiency in the English language through the study of a set of prescribed literary texts, contribute to personal development and character building, and broaden students' outlook through reading about other cultures and world view. It is also hoped that students can give a personal response to texts; show an awareness of how language is used to achieve a particular purpose, appreciate and understand other cultures (*Surat Pekeliling Ikhtisas Bil 4/2000*, 2000). Nevertheless, in spite of these profound aims, the introduction of the literature component into the English language syllabus has also formed other reactions from those who are skeptical about the incorporation.

DISCUSSION

Teaching of literature component in Malaysia

In year 2000, literature components have been implemented across the English curriculum due to low achievement in PMR and SPM for English paper in previous years. By introducing the English literature component, it is hoped that students can develop an interest towards reading and at the same time develop the English language proficiency in writing and reading. In addition, it is hoped that through this component, learners "would find the base for appreciation of literature in English with its concerns with humanity, values, beliefs and customs as well as its great tradition and heights of imagination and creativity" (Ministry of Education, 2003).

In Malaysia currently, several researches on literature in Malaysia have been focused upon the teaching and learning of literature component at secondary schools. In a study conducted by (Sivapalan, Idrus, Bhattacharyya, & Nordin, 2017; Sivapalan &

Subramaniam, 2008), it was revealed that curriculum planners and teachers of literature at secondary level face challenges in the development and teaching of the subject. The findings of their research reveal holistic education, participant readiness, readability, cultural accessibility and societal understanding as the challenges faced towards a successful acceptance of literature in the secondary ESL classroom. Apart from that, a study conducted by Sidhu (2003) also investigates the challenges faced by secondary school learners in learning literature component. Her research reveals several problems with regard to the use of literature in the language classroom namely literary texts that did not benefit the interest of learners, linguistic difficulty and cultural alienation. In sum, earlier researchers have found that learners have to struggle learning literature texts which are not familiar to them.

Thus, research in relation to the teaching and learning of literature in Malaysian secondary schools later have mostly explored into approaches or methods that can be implemented by educators to improve or enhance existing literature teaching methods. Govindasamy & Jan (2017); Hwang, Hwang, & Embi (2007) conducted a survey on the approaches in teaching literature and they found that periphrastic approach is the most preferred approach by the students in secondary school. However, Sivapalan, Ahmad, & Fatimah (2010); Sivapalan, Ahmad, Fatimah, & Ishak (2009) ventured in web-based Multimedia approach and their finding showed that the learners preferred most the web-based Multimedia approach instead. In the same year, Dhanapal (2010b, 2010a) tried the latest approach called integrated approach by blending the stylistic and reader responses to increase CCTS (Creative & Critical Thinking Skills). The pre and post test scores from her study shows significant increase after the approach has been implemented. Ever since, integrated approach has been widely ventured and tried out in schools such as Aziz & Nasharudin (2010) that nevertheless found that

students in Johor Baharu do not prefer integrated approach in learning literature.

Currently, it has been 13 years since literature has made its way into Malaysian Secondary English language curriculum. Much has been developed and said about this latest English language component in the syllabus. Since literature has created some significant attention when it was first introduced, a number of research projects were initially conducted to study various issues pertaining to the incorporation of literature in the teaching of English in secondary school in Malaysia. However, one of the highlighted issues is still under the spotlight that is the teacher teaching literature itself. According to Nasharudin & Nadia (2008), the teachers' teaching might be one of the reasons why students do not have any interest in learning literature. Ministry of Education (2013) in 2011 research found that only 50% of lessons are being delivered in an effective manner which means that the lessons did not sufficiently engage students, and followed a more passive, lecture format of content delivery (National Education Blueprint, 2013). Some teachers are having problems with the approach to teach literature in ESL classrooms as they do not know the best approach to teach literature to allow students to gain both language and appreciation of the literature itself.

Challenges in delivering literature components

Agrawal (2004) argues that, "When the literature component for English language teaching and learning was introduced into the Malaysian secondary schools a few years ago, many were caught unawares." Apart from the reactions, numerous obstacles have been identified that may impede the process of the incorporation of this latest component into the English language syllabus. For instance, initially school teachers were worried because they had no training in administering the teaching of this new component. Some may

have taken literature as a course back when they were a teacher trainee in college, but majority have limited knowledge of the teaching methodologies that lie behind the use of literature in English language teaching (Paran, 2008). Others express their concern about coping with the time to cover the whole syllabus with the inclusion of the extra component into the English language syllabus (Isa & Mahmud, 2012). As for the learners, they find that getting the writer's message is far reaching as they are not able to go beyond the literal meaning of the words or the lines. The novels and short stories also received a similar response. Some texts are culturally and contextually foreign that students lose interest and fail to engage deeply with the texts (Wigfield & Cambria, 2010). Based on this study by (Shah & Empungan, 2015), it can be seen that the students were anxious about having to read and discuss the works of writers that seemed difficult and foreign to them.

The finding of Trowler (2010) study is also consistent with previous findings where literature seemed difficult and alien to the students. In a study conducted by (Sivapalan & Subramaniam, 2008), it was revealed that curriculum planners and teachers of literature at secondary level also face challenges in the development and teaching of the subject. The findings of their research reveal holistic education, participant readiness, readability, cultural accessibility and societal understanding as the challenges faced towards a successful acceptance of literature in the secondary ESL classroom. Apart from that, a study conducted by Olson & Land (2007) also investigates the challenges faced by the literature learners in secondary school. Her research reveals several problems with regard to the use of literature in the language classroom namely literary texts that did not benefit the interest of learners, linguistic difficulty and cultural alienation. Due to this difficulty and obstacle, students were seen to be passive and were unable to respond critically and literature lessons were often too teacher-centered and thus, labeling teachers to

be dull and less creative (Sidhu, Kaur, Fook, & Yunus, 2013; Siti Norliana, 2003; Suriya Kumar, 2004). Furthermore, adding to the problem with the students' difficulty, the Star reported that nearly 60% of English teachers failed the Cambridge Placement Test (The Star, 26 September, 2012). If an English teacher is unable to pass the Cambridge test, his/her ability to teach the literature component can be questioned. As a domino, the aims or objectives of MOE might be jeopardized if the teachers themselves are not well-equipped.

The change towards the incorporation of literature as a tested component in the teaching of English not only show the process of improving the quality of English learning but also demands change in the teaching and learning of English. With the incorporation of literature, it thus requires a change in the teaching where teachers need to innovate their approach to meet the demand of teaching the literature component. Nevertheless, with the incorporation of literature component, research has found that 93.3% of the teachers have used study guides or notes emphasizing on how exam questions can be answered (Ismail et al., 2008). In doing so, much attention has been given to the content and preparing learners for examination purpose rather than creating opportunities for learners to explore their personal response through aesthetic reading which may assist learners to develop a love for reading (Blachowicz & Ogle, 2017). As a result, learners are obsessed with wanting to score. As especially among the high achiever (The Star, April 25, 2005). (Sivasubramaniam, 2006) emphasizes that when students read and write just because they need to pass exams, it is unlikely that they will appreciate the value of what they read and write. Thus, there is a need for teachers and schools to make literature "real" for students and not just "writing on paper" (The Star, April 25, 2005).

Recently, teachers' roles have been given prominence in the transformation of the Malaysian education system where the capacity

and capability of teachers are developed to ensure the Ministry's ability to deliver effective education system (National Education Blueprint, 2013, E10). International researches have shown that teacher quality is the most significant school-based factor in determining student outcomes and even the quality of a system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers (National Education Blueprint, 2013, E-14). In the learning process, Putnam & Borko (2000) pointed out two intertwined components that are important in ensuring effective learning which are teachers' content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge. Content knowledge refers to the amount and organization of knowledge in the mind of teachers but with pedagogical content knowledge, teachers will be able to go beyond subject matters by making it comprehensible to others (Loewenberg Ball, Thames, & Phelps, 2008; Mishra & Koehler, 2006). Concurrent with literature learning process, teachers' pedagogical content knowledge and content knowledge are important in developing learners' skills. This is highlighted by Donato & Brooks (2004); Paran (2008) that "literature instructors are very important in drawing on knowledge in language learning and teaching, and putting that knowledge into use in their classroom".

The Benefits of Literature in English Language Teaching

Khatib & Rahimi (2012); Maley (2001) is actually suitable to be the resource in EFL and ESL setting. This is because the ideas, events and things expressed in literature are either experienced by learners or can be imagined. Therefore, they are able to find relevance between the texts and their own personal lives. Apart from that, Maley (2001) also points out that there is a great variety of language and subject matters talked about in literature. With this, learners can enjoy a wide selection of literary texts. This perhaps can encourage ESL learners in learning the

language rather than; another important aspect of inclusion of literature in English language learning is that it allows for different interpretations (Aghagolzadeh & Tajabadi, 2012). According to Oakhill, Cain, & Bryant (2003); Qian (2002), it is rare for two readers to have an identical reading of one single text. Thus, this diversity of approaches and interpretations creates an opportunity for a genuine exchange of ideas and triggers interaction. By triggering interaction, this indirectly can encourage critical thinking among learners whereby learners will be able to produce sound argument on their choice of interpretation when trying to uncover the implied meanings of a particular text Van (2009) emphasizes that one important thing that can trigger critical thinking is an authentic text. As noted earlier, literature offers authentic resource (Hadaway, Vardell, & Young, 2002; Vardell, Hadaway, & Young, 2006), so it can thus enhance critical thinking among language learners.

Nevertheless, researchers point out that there are other factors which play crucial role in the success of teaching English language. Khatib & Rahimi (2012) argue teachers play very important role in selecting texts where they should not select a text which involve too many new and difficult vocabulary items and grammatical structures. This is because it will discourage the learners when they cannot make sense of what they have read especially in EFL settings in which proficiency level of the students may not be high enough to analyse and make sense of difficult vocabulary Janzen (2008); Williams & Burden (2004) stresses that successful teaching entails that learners understand the cultural content of the target language, especially if the language is taught for its educational values as in the ESL situation. Lawal (2010) points out two major problems in using literature for teaching ESL relate to selection and methodology. First, any literary material to be employed as a vehicle for teaching skills and forms of English must basically succeed as literature. Since other

materials (for instance, expository, descriptive and factual forms of writing) can accomplish these same goals, a justification for including literature in ESL classroom must be its superior potential for language teaching and learning (Lee, 2000). Therefore, whatever the pedagogical objectives of the teacher, the literary materials he would select must be classical and not mediocre both in terms of their linguistic qualities and ideological/cultural perspectives. Another problem that may arise is where the teachers conduct a literature lesson as a reading lesson only. That it should not be only reading lesson per say but it must be geared towards critical reading and integrated literacy learning where language skills (writing, reading, speaking and listening) all come together. The next section will discuss the specific approaches that may be applied when teaching literature component in English language (Hickman, Pollard-Durodola, & Vaughn, 2004; Lau, 2013; Street, 2014).

Teaching Approaches Used to Teach Literature in Language Classroom

In learning process, emphasizes that teachers' approaches play a prominent role to help learners to develop their skills (Mok, 2008). In relation to teaching of literature in English, Lazar (1993); Maley (2001) posits that there are actually various approaches that can be implemented in teaching of literature namely the content based approach, language based approach, personal enrichment approach and stylistic approach. In addition, Hwang et al. (2007) add to more approaches that are periphrastic and moral philosophical approach to the list. These six approaches will be discussed and studied in this research study.

Firstly, content based approach is a way of teaching knowledge about literature is seen to offer a source of information to the student. Lazar (1993) posits that the teaching methodology tend to be teacher-centered where students are required to examine the history and

characteristic of literary movements ranging from the cultural, social, political and historical background of the text. With this approach, activities suggested could be lectures, explanation, reading of notes and criticism provided in workbooks or by the teacher. These activities usually cater for instrumental purposes such as examinations. Based on the characteristics of content based approach, it can be seen that the teacher functions as the sole-distributor of the input in this learning process. Van (2009) considers this method to be heavily influenced by the New Criticism movement where "meaning is contained solely within the literary text, apart from the effect on the reader or the author's intention, and external elements are disregarded when analyzing the work". In other words, learners as readers here play a passive role in which their intention, reactions or knowledge are not relevant in interpreting the text. Thus, according to Lazar (1993) teacher in this approach needs to provide a large input of information in order to assist learners in understanding the literary texts. Thomson (1992) however criticizes that this approach tends to exclude the reader's experiences and the historical and sociolinguistic influences that are important during the reading process.

Language based approach on the other hand focuses more on the how language is been used in the literary texts. In other words figurative language is much important rather than the information or essence of ideas been conveyed by the author. According to (Richards & Rodgers, 2014), it helps to focus student attention on the way of how the language is used. Lazar (1993) posits that language based approach see literary text as a resource that cater for language practice through series of language activities rather than studying literature for the purpose of acquiring facts and information. This means students are encouraged to draw on their knowledge of familiar grammatical, lexical or discourse categories as to make aesthetic judgment of the text. This implies that learners need to play

active roles in using and implementing the language learned from the literary texts. Meanwhile, the teacher's roles in this approach is not to impose interpretation but to introduce and clarify technical terms, to prepare and offer appropriate classroom procedures, and to intervene when necessary to provide prompts or stimuli (Van, 2009). It is recommended that activities like prediction, cloze, ranking tasks, role play, poetry recital, forum, debate and discussions can be used to create opportunities for language use in the classroom.

Next, the personal response approach is more concerned with the learners' perception of and opinions on the literary texts. Vacca, Vacca, & Mraz (2005) points out that the reason behind it is to motivate and encourage students to read by making a connection between the themes of a text and his or her personal life and experiences. It can be seen here that this approach encourages students to draw on their own personal experience, feeling and opinion in learning. Van (2009) states the principle behind this approach is to include attention to the role of the reader and a process-oriented approach to reading literature. It helps students to become more actively involved both intellectually and emotionally in learning English (Henson, 2003; Roussou, 2004). This approach focuses on activities like discussion, activities which are interpretive in nature generating views and opinion on the text. Brainstorming, guided fantasy, small group discussion and ending with a short paragraph or journal writing will reveal student reaction (Collie & Slater, 2004). In other words, it can be seen that personal response approach focuses more on emotional reactions of the readers and literature here is seen as a component that interconnects with individual experiences.

The periphrastic approach deals with the general meaning of the text. Here, the teachers may paraphrase or re-word the story in a simpler language or even translate it into other languages. This approach is suitable for beginners of the target language as it acts as a

stepping stone in preparing students to deal with the authentic text. Therefore, it can be concluded that this approach can be employed in assisting students to get a better understanding of the text (Mishan, 2005; Nunan, 2006; Paesani, 2005). Activities for this approach could include the teacher telling the story or a poem using simpler language, the use of translation using other mother tongues and reading paraphrased versions or notes provided in the workbook or by the teacher (Chien, Yunus, & Mohamad, 2008). However, Van (2009) criticizes that this approach does not contribute to learners' personal development, enhance cultural awareness and develop language skills. This is because "it over-emphasizes the linguistics systems and code as the sole determinants of meaning". In other words, it lacks the appreciation of the value of literature and pleasure in understanding the effects of language on literary meanings.

Moral philosophical approach on the other hand, obviously requires learners to reflect what they have learnt based on their readings of a particular literary text. In other words, the focus of this approach is to search for moral values whilst reading a particular literary text (Lazar, 1993). Students' awareness of values is seen and this approach assists students to understand themes in future readings. Thus, students would be able to reflect what they have learnt based on their readings of a particular literary text (Lazar, 1993). According to Cynthia (2009), this approach proclaims the worthiness of moral and philosophical considerations behind one's reading. Activities for this approach could be the incorporation of moral values at the end of the literature lesson, reflective sessions, getting students to search for values whilst reading (Barnes, 2006; Estes, 2004). In sum, this approach portrays that learners need to be aware of ideological assumptions underlying the texts that they have read.

Finally, Stylistics approach requires teachers to play active roles where they assist

the learners to understand poem's significance and language features. It somehow teaches how languages can be used in different ways. Stylistic, which involves the close study of the literary text itself, has two main objectives. According to Lazar (2009), the objectives are to enable student to make meaningful interpretation of the text itself and to expand student knowledge and awareness of the language itself. In other words, it guides students towards a closer understanding and appreciation of the literary text by combining linguistic analysis and literary critics. This approach could be getting students to scrutinize a literary text by marking certain feature, getting students to look at the language features, extracting possible clues which contribute to the meaning and interpretation of the text (Lazar, 1993). Briefly, this approach highlights the aesthetic value of literature and provides access to the meaning by exploring the language and form of the literary text with a focus on meaning.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

As a whole, literature offers potential benefits in ESL instruction in many ways. Generally, it has the potential of serving as the central focus of a language unit of study in the classroom where ample activities involving the application of language skills around the literary work. Culturally, literature provides the exposure to the culture of its speakers and aesthetically, it provides the perspective insights into a man's existence within the artistic and intellectual boundaries of a literary framework. Meanwhile, point out two advantages of using literature in language learning. Firstly, learners will become familiar with the use of language in different situations when they read literature text. This is because there are social and affective elements inserted in the literature text. That all known languages and themes conveyed through them like love, death, separation and nature which are common in all culture. Secondly, the learners will learn

through authentic sources where natural and meaningful uses of language are used through the descriptions of real life culture. The characters acts and events occur according to the norms of a specific culture or society. Thus, it allows the learners to understand the other societies and cultures apart from learning the language. This indirectly motivates learners "to explore their feelings through experiencing those of others." Based on these arguments, it shows that literature benefits learners in two ways that are providing them moral and cultural values and linguistically, they have the chance to learn using authentic inputs.

Currently, Malaysian government is trying to improve learners' English competency by upgrading the English language syllabus. A lot of efforts have been put forward including the inclusion of the literature component. There are four major factors that contribute to the decline of the overall standard of English in the country. The factors are: policy, students' interest, teacher's proficiency and pedagogy, and teaching method. If teachers are a contributing factor to the decline of certain subjects, there is a need then to focus more on the teachers' role in teaching and learning literature component in English. With reference to the historical perspective of the teaching and learning in English and literature in English, the change in medium of instruction inevitably affected the new generation of teachers (product of the transition period and the Malay medium instruction, of the seventies and eighties) who have become teachers in the classroom practicing and teaching English. Though the Ministry of Education tried hard to give comprehensive training for most teachers, the concern arises with the new breed of teachers after the completion of the language conversion programmed of the 1980s. In his review of the incorporation of literature in English component, he distinguished several challenges as macro and micro challenges; the macro challenges include: holistic education challenges; participant readiness challenge, the readability challenge, the cultural accessibility

challenge, societal empathy challenge, and the post-colonial challenge.

However, The mentions that it is the micro challenge (the teaching and learning activities in the classroom) that is crucial to be addressed immediately if the literature component is to succeed. The teachers of the literature in the English component need to know what is expected of them as the implementer. Teachers should be able to identify their students' needs and strategies their teaching pertaining to these needs. They need to know their role and the theoretical foundation behind the inclusion of the component. Teacher must understand that their role has changed from the givers to the facilitators of content.

For most of the teachers, the literature component was welcomed with anxiety and misconception. Nevertheless, teachers in Malaysia on the other hand, have varied backgrounds academically and professionally. Basically, teachers differ in qualification or certification they have acquired, their teaching experiences, professional interest, purpose of teaching English, beliefs and attitudes towards teaching the subject, teacher training education, teacher development, teacher perception on particular subject in this case in the teaching of literature and teaching styles. These varied and mixed backgrounds make teachers in Malaysia an interesting subject to research on. At one end of the continuum, there are not teachers who feel inadequate teaching the component because they were neither trained in the area nor have the experience in literary studies. These teachers are incompetent not only in terms of content knowledge but also practical and pedagogical knowledge. The new teachers are the products of the 1970s when the medium of instruction was in Malay. Overall, this is a general impression of the teachers teaching the English language in Malaysia and perhaps a more detailed current study on the teaching of Literature component in Malaysia will perhaps shed a light on more efficient approaches in

teaching and learning of Literature component in Malaysia.

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